



A Snapshot of Homelessness in Massachusetts Public High Schools

2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey and Massachusetts Annual
Homeless Enrollment Data

The Massachusetts Department of Education included a housing question for the first time in the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey resulting in estimates that as many as 48,000 homeless students enroll and attend Massachusetts public schools.

July, 2007

Massachusetts Department of Education
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148
Phone 781-338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 800-439-2370
www.doe.mass.edu

A Snapshot of Homelessness in Massachusetts Public High Schools

2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey and
Massachusetts Annual Homeless Enrollment Data

Introduction

Data collected by the Massachusetts Department of Education (Department) during the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) suggest that, despite significant efforts to identify homeless students, many are going undetected by their schools. Since the reauthorization of the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Education Improvement Act under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and service providers for homeless children and families have been interested in knowing how many students in the Commonwealth are homeless. In the 2005 YRBS, the Department included a housing question for the first time. Through data collected from this question, we estimate that as many as 48,000 homeless students enroll in and attend Massachusetts public schools, far exceeding the number of homeless students actually identified by all public schools in Massachusetts.

The YRBS not only provides an estimate of how many homeless students our schools can expect to educate but also sheds some light on the life experiences of those students. These youth move frequently, attend multiple schools, are often out of school for extended periods – resulting in wide educational gaps. Their ties to communities and extended families are disrupted, and relationships with peers and adults are broken. The YRBS data cannot determine whether risk behaviors or limited access to protective factors are the cause or consequence of homeless, but they do shine a spotlight on the struggles of many homeless students trying to access and succeed in school.

The good news is that when the YRBS data are compared to the national literature and research findings on homeless youth as a whole, it appears that risk behaviors are lower for those who are attending school. It may very well be that being in school is itself a protective factor (defined on page 5).

Homeless Youth, Homeless Students

According to the definition used by the McKinney-Vento Education Assistance Act, the term "homeless youth" covers young people who lack *fixed, adequate, or regular housing*. This includes young people who:

- are living in emergency or transitional homeless shelters with their parents, or whose families have doubled up with friends or relatives due to economic hardship or other reasons.
- cannot, or choose not to, stay with their families in shelters.
- are awaiting foster care. (In Massachusetts, this means youth who are in state care or custody and in *temporary, transitional, or emergency placements*.)
- are unaccompanied or not living in the physical custody of their parents/guardians, including "runaway" or "throwaway" youth.

- have no known shelter at all and are living in parks, empty buildings, or cars, or are moving from one friend's place to another's or staying with a relative.

For this report, it is important to make the distinction between all homeless youth and those homeless youth who are enrolled in school, i.e., "homeless students." The data in this report specifically speak to the lives of homeless students enrolled in grades 9 to 12 (approximately 14 to 18 years old) in Massachusetts's public high schools.

Despite the broad definition of homelessness, identifying homeless students can be difficult, particularly if they are unaccompanied (out of the physical custody of their parents/guardians). The stigma of homelessness, fear of being taken into state care or locked up, and mistrust of adults prevent many youth from self identifying and coming forward for help.

Unidentified homeless students may be overlooked for important support services within schools and for referrals to services in the community. As a result, they frequently experience reduced access to protective factors and are more vulnerable to risky situations. Identification of homeless students is key to ensuring their educational rights under McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act of 2001 (Title X, Part C of NCLB). Without identification, homeless students are at considerable risk of disrupted education, widening educational achievement gaps, and lack of access to the support services they need.

Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Every other spring the YRBS is conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education in conjunction with the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in randomly selected classrooms in randomly selected public high schools across the Commonwealth. Students in grades 9 to 12 (approximately ages 14-18) are included. Random selection and high response rates allow YRBS data to be generalized across schools in Massachusetts and allow the Department to draw conclusions based on valid data.

The controlled administration of the YRBS creates a safe environment for students to respond to a wide variety of questions about their experiences and behaviors. Participation on the part of schools and students is completely voluntary and anonymous. Instructions, seating, and timing are coordinated to provide as much privacy, confidentiality, and safety as possible. Students are encouraged to honestly answer the survey questions and are provided with a cover sheet for additional privacy. The survey is a helpful tool for gaining a better understanding of the life of a student in a public high school in Massachusetts. For homeless students who would otherwise not self-identify or ask for help, the YRBS serves as one place where they can share what is going on in their lives.

In 2005, for the first time anywhere in the country, the Massachusetts YRBS asked the following question regarding a student's housing status:

What is your primary nighttime residence? (In other words, where do you typically sleep at night?)

- At home with my parents/guardians
- At a friend's or relative's house with my parents/guardians
- At a friend's or relative's house without my parents/guardians

- d. In a supervised shelter with my parents/guardians
- e. In a supervised shelter without my parents/guardians
- f. In a hotel/motel, car, park, campground, or other public place with my parents/guardians
- g. In a hotel/motel, car, park, campground, or other public place without my parent/guardians
- h. Other

The choices cover as many homeless living situations as could fit in the survey format, and as a result anyone who selected “b” through “h.” was considered homeless. Respondents were allowed only one response to the primary nighttime residence question.

Of the 3,522 students who participated in the YRBS in Massachusetts, 3,264 answered the question about nighttime residence. Students that selected “a. At home with my parents/guardians” were identified as housed and totaled 3,112. The numbers of students in each individual homeless category were too small to be considered reliable, but as a group 152 students were considered to be homeless.

Homeless students who might not be captured by the nighttime residence question could include students who were homeless earlier in the year but had found housing at the time of the survey, or students who went homeless after the survey was administered in the spring. For example, unaccompanied youth who cycle in and out of their family homes may respond they are at home if that is where they are residing on the day of the survey. Additionally, national research on homeless children and youth shows high rates of absenteeism (National Resource and Training Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness); therefore, there is a greater chance that a homeless student was absent the day the survey was administered than a student living at home with his/her parents. For example, a survey of unaccompanied youth in Minnesota found that while 84% of the respondents were currently enrolled in school, only 65% had been in school the day of the survey (Wilder, p 29-45). Taken together, this suggests that the rate of homelessness based on the YRBS is most likely an underestimate of homeless students in Massachusetts’s public schools.

Please also note that the YRBS was administered during the spring months prior to the 2005 hurricane season and did not include students displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

YRBS and National Data

Where available, data from national sources are included as sidebars in this report to provide a context for 2005 YRBS Massachusetts data. In comparing data collected around the nation with the Massachusetts data, it is important to remember that most data have been collected on all homeless youth, which includes those who are enrolled in school as well as those who are not attending school. In addition, some of the national research covers youth up to age 24 and others only up to age 18.

All comparisons in this report are statically significant unless otherwise stated.

Demographics

According to the YRBS, and compared to the general population of all public high school students, the general demographics are as follows. Keeping in mind the possibility of an underestimate of homeless students in Massachusetts, note how closely the Massachusetts numbers mirror the regional and national data (shaded boxes).

	<u>Homeless Students</u>	<u>Housed Students</u>
<u>Sex</u>		
Female	44%	50%
Male	56%	51%
<u>Race</u>		
White	51%	76%
Black	21%	9%
Hispanic	18%	11%
Asian	4%	2%
Bi/multi-racial/other	6%	2%

<u>Residency</u>		
Always lived in US	84%	89%
In US <1 year	3%	1%

<u>Grade</u>	<u>% of Homeless Students</u>	<u>% Homeless in Grade</u>
9 th	25%	4%
10 th	19%	3%
11 th	26%	5%
12 th	27%	5%
Other	2%	17%

<u>Age</u>	<u>% of Homeless Students</u>	<u>% Homeless in Age Group</u>
14 or less	10%	5%
15	20%	3%
16	20%	3%
17	29%	5%
18 or over	22%	6%

The average age of a homeless student participating in the YRBS was 16.3 years old.

In 2002 the Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents found homeless youth were:

White	59%
Black	22%
Hispanic	4%
Asian	1%
Bi-racial	11%
Native American	3%

Nationally, homeless youth demographics suggest that:

- Estimates of homeless and unaccompanied youth range from 1.3 to 1.7 million per year (Moore, p4, National Coalition for the Homeless).
- “One in eight youth under 18 will leave home and become a street person in need of services, and 40% do not return home.” (Moore, p10-11)
- Youth between 15 and 17 (grades 9-12) make up two thirds of the runaway and throwaway population. (National Runaway Switchboard and NISMART 10/2002).

Responses to the question on primary nighttime residence were cross-referenced with responses to questions concerning risk behaviors and protective factors, providing a snapshot in the life of a homeless student. While we can look at the correlations between different behaviors and homelessness, we cannot draw a conclusion as to whether homelessness is a cause or consequence. But we can have a better understanding of what it means to be a homeless student.

Protective Factors

In the life of any high school student, there are adults, opportunities, and activities that support his/her education and growth into adulthood. Known as "protective factors," these experiences provide a buffer to challenges experienced by youth and support the development of the resiliency a youth needs to be successful. Unfortunately, for homeless students, protective factors appear to occur less frequently and are often inaccessible when most needed.

Academic Success

Academic success, and its attendant positive reinforcement, is one protective factor. In Massachusetts:

- 66% of homeless students reported earning good grades (A, B, C) compared to 86% of their housed peers.

Special Education

Perhaps due to frequent transfers between schools and the ever-widening educational gaps experienced by many homeless students, they receive special education support services at a higher rate than housed students:

- About 20% of homeless students currently receive special education services, compared to 11% of their housed peers have an Individual Education Plan.

The Minnesota survey of unaccompanied youth reported higher rates of special education services for unaccompanied youth and well as the need of life/job skill programming.

- One third of homeless youth (49% of males and 24% for females) received special education services while in school.
- 59% had attended a program on life/independent living skills.
- 20% had been in job training, two-thirds of whom completed and almost half of whom had jobs using those skills. (Wilder, p29-45)

Nationally, we know that in 2005:

- 75% of runaway and homeless youth have or will drop out of school (NRS, Moore, p13).
- 9% of callers to the National Runaway Switchboard cited school/education as a reason for being out of the home, making it the fourth most frequently cited reason (NRS).

Among unaccompanied youth in Minnesota in 2003 we know that:

- 7% completed high school or a GED
- 83% had attended school the year before being interviewed
- 84% were currently enrolled in school and 65% had been in school the day of the survey
- 51% of homeless young adults (18 to 24) had completed high school or a GED
- The median monthly income for unaccompanied boys was \$182 and for girls was \$266 (Wilder, p29-45)

Organized Activities

Volunteering or participating in structured activities outside of school brings youth into contact with adults and peers to help build community connections and establish strong relationships, all of which buffer a student against feelings of isolation and alienation. Additionally, the more time involved in organized activities, the less time youth are alone, unsupervised, and exposed to risky situations. Though there may be many reasons why homeless students are not participating in these activities, the YRBS only shows the extent to which they are not involved at the same rates as housed students.

- Only 30% of homeless students participate in an organized activity outside of school, while 50% of their housed peers do.
- Only 34% of homeless students volunteer one or more hours a month, compared to 44% of housed students.

“Relationships and social networks are very important to the support and survival of homeless youth. Most importantly, strong and positive relationships with adults, programs, or organizations can prevent a homeless episode.”

National Alliance to End Homelessness, p2.

Positive Adult Relationships

Having a caring adult to ask questions of and discuss concerns with is particularly important to positive youth development. The adult may be a family member, neighbor, religious leader, teacher, or club advisor. For many students, knowing that there is at least one teacher, or other adult in school, with whom they can talk to contributes to their success. For homeless students, these positive adult relationships seem to be fewer or less accessible, leaving them with less adult guidance and therefore more vulnerable to risky behaviors, including gang membership.

- 39% of homeless students do not have an adult family member they feel they can talk to about things that are important to them, compared to 18% of their housed peers.
- 58% of homeless students, compared to 81% of housed students, felt there was a teacher or other school adult they could talk to if they had a problem.
- 29% of homeless youth were gang members, compared to 9% of housed students.

The 2002 Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents reported that among the friends of homeless youth:

- 84% had been suspended or expelled from school, and
- 75% had dropped out.

Yet the same study also found that 82% of homeless youth sought help from a school guidance counselor.

Nutrition and Health

Good nutrition and health have long been recognized as a necessary foundation for learning. Conversely, homelessness has been traditionally associated with hunger. National research confirms this correlation.

In Massachusetts, homeless students are less likely to eat breakfast, but they consume milk, fruit, and vegetables at roughly the same rates as housed youth, probably due to access to free school lunch through McKinney-Vento legislation. However, homeless students do not seem to have as ready access to opportunities for physical activity.

“Homeless children go hungry at twice the rate of other children. They also experience illnesses such as stomach problems, ear infections, and asthma at higher rates.”

SAMHSA, National Resource and Training Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness

Homeless students are statistically similar to their housed peers in the following areas:

- Homeless students are as likely to drink milk as their housed peers (14% to 15%) and to eat five or more fruits and vegetables a day (13% to 10%).
- Homeless students are as likely to be overweight or at risk of overweight (27% to 27%) or view themselves as overweight (30% to 31%) as their housed peers.
- Homeless students are almost as likely to attend physical education classes compared to their housed peers (54% to 60%).
- 56% of homeless students exercised vigorously three or more times in the past week compared to 62% of housed students.
- 38% of homeless students, similar to their housed peers (33%), watch three or more hours of television per day.

In other nutrition and health areas, homeless and housed students are statistically different.

- Only 23% of homeless students eat breakfast every day, compared to 33% of their peers.
- Homeless students are less likely to be trying to lose weight (39% to 47%).
- However, homeless students who were trying to lose weight were twice as likely as their housed peers to have vomited or used laxatives to lose weight in the past month (12% to 5%).
- 15% of homeless students got little or no exercise, compared to only 9% of their peers.
- Homeless students are less likely to participate on a sports team (42% to 55%).

Risk Behaviors

Just as there are protective factors that support the academic and social growth of a student, there are the behaviors that detrimentally impact students – risk behaviors. These behaviors, while harmful at each individual occurrence, have long-term repercussions and can have a cumulative negative effect if repeated and/or combined with other risk behaviors.

While all of these comparisons are statistically significant, the data only support a correlation between homelessness and risk behaviors. The YRBS is not predictive or causal: it cannot be determined whether the behavior caused the homelessness or the homelessness caused the behavior. The YRBS data on risk behaviors are of concern for all students; especially homeless students.

Substance Abuse

Homeless students abuse drugs and alcohol at a greater rate. As with their housed peers, alcohol seems to be the drug of choice, but access and the use of all substances are dramatically higher for homeless students. Though relatively high, the substance abuse percentages for homeless students in Massachusetts do not appear to be as high as that of homeless youth nationally. While this could be viewed as a difference between state and national data, this could also be explained as the difference between homeless youth in school (YRBS) and all homeless youth, including those homeless youth not attending school.

- 48% of homeless students started drinking before the age of 13, compared to 21% for housed students.
- 70% of homeless students have had a drink of alcohol in the past month, while 46 % of housed students had a drink in the past month.
- 48% of homeless students have had five or more drinks in a row in the past 30 days, compared to 25% of their housed peers.
- 23% of homeless students compared to 4% of housed students have used marijuana at school in the past 30 days;
- 31% of homeless students compared to 9% of housed students tried marijuana before 13; and
- 57% of homeless students vs. 25% of housed students have used marijuana in the past 30 days.
- When asked if they have ever used cocaine, homeless students answered "yes" 28% of the time, compared to 7% of housed students.
- 28% of homeless students have used ecstasy at some time in their lives, while only 6% of housed students have.
- 15% of homeless students compared to 2% of housed students have ever used heroin, and 14% have used it in the past month.
- 13% of homeless students compared to 1% of housed students have ever injected drugs.

19% of runaway and throwaway children and youth are substance-dependent.

NISMART, Runaway and Throwaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics, p8

Of homeless youth:

- 75% used marijuana
- 33% used hallucinogens, stimulants, analgesics
- 25% used crack, cocaine, inhalants, sedatives

National Alliance to End Homelessness, p2

School Safety

Without a place to call home, safety in school for homeless students appears to be an increased concern. Homeless students are subject to high rates of bullying, carrying weapons, and being involved in fights more frequently than their housed peers. Though the YRBS cannot verify it, the data suggest that the stigma and trauma of homelessness may well be feeding a violent cycle of being bullied, fleeing, fighting, or bullying back.

In the past month ...

- 16% of homeless students, compared to 3% of their housed peers, missed school in at least once the last 30 days because they felt unsafe at school, or on the way to or from school.

- 28% of homeless students carried a weapon to school compared to 5% of their peers.
- 20% of homeless students have carried a gun compared to 2% of their peers.

In the past year ...

- 33% of homeless students compared to 22% of housed students had property stolen or damaged at school.
- 31% of homeless students compared to 24% of their housed peers were bullied.
- 22% of homeless students compared to 5% of housed students were threatened or injured with a weapon at school.
- 28% of homeless students compared to 10% of their peers were involved in a fight.
- 16% were injured in a fight compared to 4% of housed students.

Depression and Suicide

Many homeless students have experienced domestic violence and have been physically or sexually abused. Homelessness adds yet another layer of issues, concerns, and risks. Depression and suicidal thoughts become part of homeless youths' make-up, particularly if they are out on their own.

- 38% of homeless students had felt sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the past year compared to 26 % of their housed peers.
- 38% of homeless students compared to 17% of their housed peers had hurt themselves on purpose in the past year – by cutting or bruising themselves.
- 28% of homeless students compared to 12% of their housed peers had considered suicide in the past year.
- 27% of homeless students compared to 11% of their housed peers had planned a suicide attempt in the past year.
- 19% of homeless students compared to 6% of their housed peers had attempted suicide at least once in the past 12 months.
- 14% of homeless students compared to 2% of their housed peers had attempted suicide resulting in an injury in the past year.

National data on homeless youth finds that:

- 47% of homeless school age children experienced mental illness including anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (Whitbeck, et al, p8).
- 51% of homeless adolescents considered suicide in the past year (Whitbeck, et al, p8).
- 32% of homeless and runaway youth attempted suicide at some point during their lives.

While, disturbingly high, the depression and suicide rates for homeless youth enrolled in school are lower than that of homeless youth population in general and suggest that attending school and accessing school services may help to offset the emotional impact of homelessness.

Sexual Contact/Behavior

Sexual contact and behavior among homeless youth is very high – another risk behavior that could be either caused by or a consequence of homelessness. When asked, many youth cite sexual abuse as a reason for leaving home. By the same token, for homeless youth in general with few job opportunities, the exchange of sex for food, shelter, money, and clothing becomes a commonplace means of survival.

- 31% of homeless students, compared to 9% of housed students, have been hurt by a date.
- 26% of homeless students experienced sexual contact against their will compared to 9% of their housed peers.
- 84% of homeless students have ever had sexual intercourse compared to 45% of their housed peers.
- Twice as many homeless students as housed students have had sex in the past 3 months (69% to 33%).
- Homeless students were twice as likely to consume alcohol at the time of engaging in sexual behavior (44% compared to 22%).
- Homeless students are less likely to have used birth control than housed students (77% compared to 91%).
- Homeless students are less likely to have been taught about HIV/AIDS in school (81% vs. 93%).
- 53% of homeless students had more than four sexual partners compared to 12% of their housed peers.
- 29% had been pregnant, or had gotten someone pregnant, compared to 4% of their housed peers.
- 15% compared to 3% had ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease or HIV/AIDS.
- 16% of students who self identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual are homeless, compared to 4% of their straight peers.
- 15% of homeless students self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

The Minnesota survey of unaccompanied youth found the following related numbers among 9th grade youth:

- Unaccompanied youth were three times as likely to have been hurt by a date as their housed peers (15% to 5%)
- 29% of girls had ever been pregnant compared to 1% of their peers
- Boys were 10 times more likely to have gotten someone pregnant (21% to 2%)
- 31% of girls were and 22% of boys had been sexually abused compared to 9% and 3% of their peers
- 41% of girls and 33% of boys had been physically abused compared to 14% and 9%

Annual Data on Homeless Children and Youth Enrolled in Massachusetts Schools

Each year, the Department collects the number of homeless students enrolled in high school and their primary nighttime residence at the time of their initial identification as homeless from all school districts, as mandated by McKinney-Vento Act. For every one homeless student a district identifies, it is estimated that there are approximately six or seven homeless students who are not being identified. For the 2004/2005 school year, of the 972,371 students enrolled in Massachusetts public schools 7,085 or 0.73% were reported by school districts as being homeless. Of that number, 1,761 were identified as homeless students enrolled in grades 9 -12, with 344 identified as unaccompanied youth, living on their own. During the 2004/ 2005 school year there were 293,398 students enrolled in grades 9-12 which would make the 1,761 students identified as homeless 0.6% of the total public high school population.

However, in the 2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a population-based survey considered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to be representative of Massachusetts's youth, 4.2% of all Massachusetts public high school students could be considered homeless. Two percent (2%) are unaccompanied, that is, they are not in the physical custody of their parents or guardians.

- Applying this 4.2% homelessness rate (and 2% unaccompanied rate) to the total high school population of 293,398, we can estimate that over 12,000 Massachusetts public high school students fall in the official definition of homelessness and well over 5,000 could be categorized as unaccompanied.
- Since high school students comprise approximately one-quarter of all students in Massachusetts's public schools, our figures suggest that there may be 48,000 or more homeless students in the Commonwealth.
- The discrepancy between the 7,085 Massachusetts students actually identified as homeless and the estimate of 48,000 plus homeless students suggests that a great majority of homeless students are going unidentified by their school systems.

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

Each year, the Department awards federal McKinney-Vento sub-grants to districts with significant homeless populations through a competitive process. During the 2004/2005 school year, 21 districts received sub-grants. Those districts report on the services provided to homeless students and on their MCAS results. As with the YRBS data, the MCAS results for those identified homeless students are troubling. Listed below are the 10th grade results. The MCAS was administered during the spring of 2005. This is the same population from which the 2005 YRBS sample was drawn, but respondents are not necessarily the same students.

10th Grade 2005 MCAS Results Statewide

ELA	Number	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Needs Improvement	% Warning/ Failing
All Students	72,036	23	42	25	10
Homeless	147	1	20	41	38

Math	Number	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Needs Improvement	% Warning/ Failing
All Students	72,140	35	27	24	15
Homeless	153	3	14	28	55

- 448 grade 10 students were identified as homeless during the 2004/2005 school year. Of that number:
 - o 33% took the English Language Arts (ELA) exam.
 - o 34% took the Mathematics exam.
 - o 62% passed ELA, compared to 90% of all students.
 - o 45% passed Mathematics, compared to 85% of all students.

While the 448 identified 10th graders may include students reported by two or more districts, the participation rates of homeless students in MCAS are far lower than the 99% for the general student body. In addition, the high failure rates suggest that homeless students are in need of MCAS support services, which they may not be accessing due to transience and poor attendance.

While correlations between failing MCAS and dropping out of school are not clear among the general student population, for homeless students high MCAS failure rates, low academic achievement rates (not achieving grades of C or better as reported on the YRBS), and high dropout rates are part of a discouraging academic picture and speak to the relationship of housing instability on learning and success in school.

Summary

Since the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Education Improvement Act of 2002, the Department has urged school district homeless education liaisons to identify homeless students and look beyond the school walls to their communities for services that can support and assist homeless children, youth, and families. Despite those efforts, the YRBS data show high incidence of risk behaviors and low rates of access to protective factors for homeless students in our public high schools.

In addition, as reported earlier, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey results indicate a homeless rate of 4.2% for high school students, substantially higher than the 0.6% rate identified by districts. If the YRBS results are accurate, only about 14% of homeless youth in Massachusetts public schools are being appropriately identified. Without identification, homeless students may not be referred to all the services they need. Left unsupported by critical services, homeless students are at great risk, both personally and educationally.

Whether risk behaviors are the cause or the consequence of youth homelessness, services, particularly in the areas of medical or mental health and substance abuse prevention, are failing to reach homeless students or to meet their current needs, as evidenced by the high rates of risk behavior. A comparison of state MCAS performance rates with the performance rates of identified homeless students in districts with McKinney-Vento subgrants further underscores the need for additional support services, including academic support, that are not now reaching many of our homeless students.

Taking into account the statistics from the National Runaway Switchboard, 75% of homeless youth will or have dropped out of school. Though these numbers may seem small when spread over the entire state, within a single district they are often large enough to affect the district's school climate, attendance rate, dropout rate, graduation rate, and annual yearly progress. Districts should be advised when addressing school climate, attendance, dropout prevention, and MCAS academic support services to take into account the needs of their homeless students and, in collaboration with other community and state agencies, design programs and supports to prevent homelessness from occurring.

Nonetheless, the differences in data on homeless youth and homeless students suggest that schools are themselves a protective factor. Whether students are being identified as homeless or not, their attendance in school significantly lowers risk behaviors. A strong argument can be made that regardless of whether or not a high school student is identified as homeless, he or she should be able to access needed services. However, students often do not have the self-awareness needed to be able to ask for help, or even to know they need help. The stigma of homelessness itself often creates further barriers to requesting services, and resources are often not easy to locate. Given this reality, it becomes imperative for schools to identify students who have become homeless, to help connect them with support services, and to target resources that address their needs.

Resources

Center for Law and Social Policy. Leave No Youth Behind: Opportunities for Congress to Reach Disconnected Youth, 2003. Washington DC, www.clasp.org

Massachusetts Department of Education. 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results, 2007. Malden, MA.

Moore, Jan. Unaccompanied and Homeless Youth: Review of Literature (1995-2005), 2005. National Center for Homeless Education, Greensboro, NC.

National Alliance to End Homelessness. Fundamental Issues to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness, Youth Homeless Series Brief No. 1, May 2006. Washington DC; www.endhomelessness.org.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network; Homelessness and Extreme Poverty Working Group. Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children, 2005. Los Angeles, CA; www.NCTSTNet.org
National Coalition for the Homeless. Homeless Youth, NCH Fact Sheet #13, June 2006. Washington DC; www.nationalhomeless.org.

National Resources and Training Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness. Question #5 What about the needs of children who are homeless? Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, www.nrchmi.samhsa.gov/facts/facts_question_5.asp.

National Runaway Switchboard. NRS Call Statistics, 2005, July 2006. Chicago, IL; www.nrscrisisline.org.

National Runaway Switchboard. Third Party Runaway Statistics, 2005, July 2006. Chicago, IL; www.nrscrisisline.org.

New York City Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations. State of the City's Homeless Youth Report, 2005, 2005. New York City, NY.

NISMART. Runaway/Throwaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics, October 2002. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Washington DC; www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. Education for Homeless Children and Youth Massachusetts Data, School Year 2004-2005, November, 2005. Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA.

Whitbeck, Les B. and Hoyt, Danny R. Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents: Baseline Summary Report for All Participating Agencies, April 2002. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.

Wilder Research. Homeless Youth in Minnesota: 2003 Statewide Survey of People without Permanent Shelter, February 2005. Saint Paul, Minnesota.